

Alfred Bersbach House
1120 Michigan Avenue
Wilmette
Cook County
Illinois

HABS No. ILL-1103

HABS
ILL,
16-WILM,
2-

PHOTOGRAPHS
WRITTEN HISTORICAL DATA

Historic American Buildings Survey
Office of Archeology and Historic Preservation
National Park Service
Department of the Interior
Washington, D.C. 20240

ALFRED BERSBACH HOUSE

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ILL,
16-WILM,2-

Location: 1120 Michigan Avenue, Wilmette, Cook County,
Illinois.

Present Owner: Joseph and Mildred Reeves.

Present Use: Private residence.

Statement of
Significance: This house is one of the best works of the Prairie
School architect, John S. Van Bergen. The strong
horizontalts of the composition show the influence
of Walter Burley Griffin and Frank Lloyd Wright,
both of whom employed Van Bergen.

PART I. HISTORICAL INFORMATION

A. Physical History:

1. Date of erection: The house was begun previous to the purchase of the ground in December, 1915, since plans, and perspective and wall section details were published in an article on Van Bergen in the Western Architect, June, 1915. Carl Condit gives a date of 1914, which is very probable for the design, with construction commencing early in 1915. Unfortunately, building permit records do not extend this far back in Wilmette.
2. Architect: John S. Van Bergen. In his dissertation, H. Allen Brooks quoted this biographical sketch sent to him by Van Bergen, then living in Santa Barbara, California: "Born October 2, 1885, in Oak Park, Illinois. Attended Chicago Technical College for special work. Worked for Walter Burley Griffin Jan. 1907 to Oct. 1908; Frank Lloyd Wright Jan. 1909 to Dec. 1909; William Drummond June 1910 to June 1911. Passed Illinois Architectural Exam. and had license in 1911. Then in business for myself in Oak Park. Had an office in Evanston for about a year. Think it was 1915, but kept Oak Park office until WWI." Van Bergen died in 1969.
3. Original and subsequent owners: Legal description: Lot 11 in Block 9 of Milton H. Wilson's Addition to Wilmette in the eastern half of the southeast quarter of Section 27, Township 42, Range 13.

Chain of Title from the Chicago Title and Trust Company, tract book 9-1: The lot was originally purchased from Northwestern University and put in Helena Bersbach's name, December 9, 1915 (Document 5766938). The Bersbachs sold the house and lot to Eva A. Schram, July 20, 1920 (Document 6891133). Mrs. Schram put the property in trust with the Drovers Trust and Savings Bank, September 2, 1947 (Document 14152610) and from the bank it passed to Joseph Reeves following the death of Mrs. Schram. The Drovers Trust and Savings Bank granted the deed to the Reeves, the present owners and occupants on September 13, 1956 (Document 16728047).

4. Original plans, construction, etc.: This building is a good example of how Van Bergen used the idiom of Frank Lloyd Wright, yet never slavishly copied the latter's work. It is commonly believed in Wilmette to actually be a Frank Lloyd Wright house. Condit says in regard to Van Bergen: "The intricate rectangular patterns that one finds in Sullivan, Wright, and Drummond distinguish Van Bergen's work. The best of his designs is a classic in the Wrightian idiom--the house built for Alfred Bersbach in 1914 on Michigan Avenue in Wilmette (Fig. 180). The dense vertical pattern of narrow grouped windows and mullions, disposed generally over the two main wings, is dominated by the widely overhanging horizontal roof planes." The Chicago School of Architecture, p. 211./

B. Historical Events and Persons Connected with the Structure:

"Alfred Bersbach, secretary and treasurer of J. Manz and Co., ('one of the greatest engraving houses of America') is a native and representative Chicagoan, and was born November 5, 1856. He was educated in this city and in 1872 began his active life as an employee of Mr. Manz and as has been stated, he has had an interest in the business since 1880, and been the secretary and treasurer of J. Manz & Co. since 1890. To Mr. Bersbach's business ability and tireless energy Mr. Manz attributes much of the success of the enterprise in these days of close and sharp competition.

"Mr. Bersbach is a prominent Mason, and is a member of Ravenswood Lodge No. 777, A.F. & A.M., of Columbus Chapter No. 202, R.A.M., of St. Bernard Commandery No. 35, K.T., and of the Oriental Consistory, to be eligible to membership in which the thirty-second degree in Masonry is requisite. He is identified with Medinah Temple of the Nobles of the Mystic Shrine. On Christmas, 1878, he married Miss Helena Malcolm (sic), and of their children two daughters and a son survive." Industrial Chicago..., Vol. III, pp. 809-810./

Mr. Bersbach was a member of the Chicago Historical Society, and on his personal record sheet from the society supplied the following biographical information:

"born: Nov. 5, 1856; Chicago, Ill.
married: Helena Kolkebeek (sic), daughter of Frank K.
Mrs. Bersbach was born, Aug. 12, 1858 in
Chicago, Ill.
occupation: Pres., Manz Corporation.
children: Lileau C. C. 1880-
Amy A. F. 1882-
Alfred E. 1883-86
Frank J. 1888
died: Sept. 22, 1925 (filled in by the Society)
son of: John Bersbach of Germany and Madelon Zenner
of France."

C. Sources of Information:

Condit, Carl W. The Chicago School of Architecture. Chicago:
University of Chicago Press, 1964.

Peisch, Mark L. The Chicago School of Architecture. New
York: Random House, 1964.

Industrial Chicago: The Manufacturing Interests. Vol. III.
Chicago: The Goodspeed Publishing Company, 1891.

Western Architect. Vol. XXI (June, 1915).

In this issue is an article and drawings which cover
Van Bergen's work extensively and also included is an
essay by Van Bergen, "A Plea for Americanism in Our
Architecture."

Brooks, H. Allen. "The Prairie School." Unpublished Ph. D.
dissertation, Art Department, Northwestern University,
1957.

Prepared by Leland M. Roth
Historian
National Park Service
1967

PART III. PROJECT INFORMATION

The records of this structure were made during the 1967 Chicago IV Project. This was the fourth in a series of summer projects designed to record the significant architecture of the Chicago area. The project was sponsored by the late Mr. Earl J. Reed, FAIA. He was assisted by John R. Fugard, FAIA, Treasurer, and Miss Agnes E. Hodges of the Chicago Chapter Foundation, and a Selection Committee consisting of James Arkin, AIA; Ruth Schoneman, Art Institute of Chicago; and J. Carson Webster, Northwestern University. Organizations cooperating with HABS in this project were: The Chicago Chapter of the American Institute of Architects; the Chicago Chapter Foundation; the Chicago Community Trust; the Craham Foundation for Advanced Studies; the Illinois Arts Council; and the Chicago Heritage Committee. The Council also made funds available for a Statewide Inventory Project with out-of-Chicago architects cooperating. Quarters were provided at Glessner House through the Chicago School of Architecture Foundation.

Mr. James C. Massey, Chief, Historic American Buildings Survey, was in over-all charge of HABS summer programs. The Project Supervisor was Wesley Shank, Iowa State University. Other members of the summer team were: Historian Leland Roth, University of Illinois, Urbana; Photographer, Philip Turner; Secretary, Mrs. Bert Schloss; and Student Assistant Architects: Keleal Nassin, Tulane University; Maurice Criffin, Illinois Institute of Technology; Allan Steenhusen and David Vyverberg, Iowa State University.